

Taking Care of Yourself After a Traumatic Event

Overview

Help in understanding emotional reactions to traumatic events and tragedies, including frightening emergencies and sudden losses, with suggestions about coping and getting help.

- Common reactions
- Helping yourself
- If reactions persist

If you have been through a traumatic event -- for example, a natural disaster, sudden loss, or frightening exposure to violence -- you may experience emotional reactions for weeks or even months afterwards. Although many stress reactions diminish fairly quickly, others may last longer than you expect. It's important to take care of yourself and to remember that resources are available to help.

Common reactions

People respond to trauma in different ways, depending on their personalities and previous experiences. Some of the more common reactions to trauma include:

- flashbacks and disturbing memories about what has happened
- feelings of numbness or detachment
- bad dreams and difficulty sleeping
- feelings of sadness and grief
- feelings of anxiety, fear, guilt, and powerlessness
- feelings of anger and irritability
- tiredness
- changes in appetite
- difficulty concentrating

Helping yourself

After a traumatic event, it's important to:

- *Acknowledge your emotions.* Many people find it helps to talk with others about their experience. Others find that they need time for quiet, private reflection on their feelings. Don't be hard on yourself for feeling the way you do.
- *Take care of your health.* Make a point of eating well-balanced meals and getting some exercise, even if it's just a walk around the block. If you don't have the appetite for ordinary meals, try eating smaller nutritious snacks through the day. Limit or avoid alcohol and caffeine, but drink plenty of water -- stress can sometimes lead to dehydration.

- *Get rest.* This can be hard if you are taking care of others, but it's important. Closing your eyes and practicing deep-breathing for even five to ten minutes twice a day can help.
- *Be careful when you are cooking, driving, and working.* Accidents are more likely to happen when people are distracted by stress.

It can also be a good idea to:

- *Write down your thoughts.* Many people find it reduces their anxiety to keep a journal of their feelings. This can be especially helpful if you're having difficulty sleeping.
- *Spend time with others.* Isolation can make many people who are feeling bad feel even worse.
- *Maintain rituals that are relaxing and fulfilling.* If you always enjoy playing cards on Thursday night, try to find a way to get a game together. If you read aloud to your family every evening, try to continue if possible.
- *Reduce other stress in your life.* Try to avoid making big life changes if you can. Eliminate non-essential activities where you can, especially those that you don't enjoy.

If reactions persist

Sometimes reactions to a trauma are so severe that they last long after the event and make it hard to get back to everyday life. Left untreated these reactions can also affect your physical well-being. If you have persistent problems with any of the following, it's important to get expert help:

- sleep difficulties or bad dreams
- memories and flashbacks of the event that interrupt your everyday life
- withdrawal from activities that you once enjoyed
- feelings of anger, sadness, or mood swings
- difficulty with personal relationships

Many professionals, including psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers, specialize in helping people who have undergone a traumatic event. Some people find that joining a support group of people who have been through a similar trauma can be helpful; others prefer one-on-one conversations. If available, you can call your company's employee assistance program (EAP) for help and referrals.

3 • Taking Care of Yourself After a Traumatic Event

If you are experiencing physical reactions to stress, like headaches, heart palpitations or chest pains, dizziness, or difficulty breathing, it's important to see a medical doctor.

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